

Guidance and Advice
F32
National Research Service Award
for Individual Postdoctoral Fellows
National Cancer Institute

The guidance and advice offered below consolidates much of the key information about the **F32** National Research Service Award for Individual Postdoctoral Fellows and/or directs you to official sources of information. We have tried to clarify key issues about the F32 postdoctoral fellowship and place it in perspective relative to some of the other career development opportunities (i.e., K-awards) offered by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to postdoctoral candidates pursuing cancer research careers.

I. DESCRIPTION AND APPLICATION:

The Individual National Research Service Award (NRSA) for Individual Postdoctoral Fellows or F32 grant mechanism is for postdoctoral candidates who need a period of supervised research experiences to achieve independence. The National Research Service Act was enacted by Congress in 1974 to ensure that a cadre of highly trained scientists would be available in adequate numbers and in appropriate research areas to carry out the Nation's biomedical and behavioral research agenda. **With regard to cancer research, the individual F32 grant is used primarily by candidates with Ph.D.s who are pursuing typical careers in basic cancer research.** Individuals who are pursuing cancer research careers in the clinical sciences and the prevention, control, behavioral and population sciences can apply for F32s but there are other better options described on this website for them to consider that are tailored to their specific needs. The information below has been selected to draw your attention to certain special features of the F32 and to answer some of the typical questions asked by applicants.

If you want to apply for an F32 award, all of the information you need is contained within the following areas of the NIH website:

1. A specific announcement **describing the F32** in detail is in the NIH Guide entitled "NIH National Research Service Awards for Individual Postdoctoral Fellows (F32)" released on December 11, 1998 with a Program Announcement number of PA-99-025. This announcement can be accessed directly by "clicking on" the following website address: <http://www.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-99-025.html>.
2. To apply for an F32, you must follow the instructions provided in the **application Form PHS 416-1**. This application kit can be accessed by "clicking on" the following website address: <http://www.nih.gov/grants/funding/416/phs416.htm>.

Application receipt dates are April 5, August 5 and December 5; the initial peer review dates are June/July, Oct./Nov. and Feb./March, respectively; and the earliest possible start dates are Aug./Sept., Dec./Jan., and April/May, respectively.

II. KEY FEATURES OF THE F32:

There are a number of key features of the F32 that every applicant should be aware of.
Requirements:

1. You must be a **U.S. citizen** or U.S. non-citizen national, or have notarized evidence of permanent residence status to be eligible for an F32 award. The NIH/NCI does not resolve citizenship issues; this must be done with your institution.

2. Because the F32 is subject to the legislative provisions of the 1974 National Research Service Act and the 1993 NIH Revitalization Act, there is a **payback obligation**. Postdoctoral fellows incur a service obligation of 1 month for each month of support during the first 12 months of the NRSA postdoctoral support. Thus, individuals who continue under the award for two years will have paid off their first year obligation by the end of the second year. Individuals who are supported for less than two years under the NRSA will have to provide additional proof that they have remained in health-related research, research training, or teaching for the required payback period. Most of the forms noted above after you receive support are related to this payback obligation and to tracking the individual during the payback period.
3. **After your application has been approved for funding**, there are other forms you are required to use. These are noted below and can be accessed by "clicking on" the following website address: <http://www.nih.gov/grants/forms.htm>.
 - a. **Activation** Notice Form PHS 416-5 must be submitted to the NIH before money can be disbursed.
 - b. A **Payback Agreement** Form PHS 6031 must accompany the PHS 416-5 above when the award is for the initial 12 months of NRSA postdoctoral support.
 - c. The **Application for Continuation of Support** in non-competing years must be submitted using Form PHS 416-9.
 - d. When support ends, the fellow must submit a **Termination** Notice (Form PHS 416-7).
 - e. If a fellow has a payback obligation when the support ends, an Annual Payback Activities Certification Form or Form PHS 6031-1 must be submitted until the payback obligation is satisfied.
 - f. All fellowships are administered by the NIH in accordance with the current NRSA Policy Guidelines for Individual Awards and Institutional Grants. This information can be accessed by "clicking on" the following website address:
<http://grants.nih.gov/training/nrsa.htm>.

Special Features

1. Individuals are allowed only **three years** of aggregate postdoctoral support under any combination of National Research Service Award Mechanisms. For example, if you are supported on an "institutional" NRSA T32 grant for one year and then apply for an "individual" F32 grant, you can only apply for two years of support. **Exceptions to the three year limit** require approval from the NCI. **With strong justification, the NCI usually considers extension requests for an additional year, especially if there is evidence that the science of the project is making important progress and the individual will be able to bring the project to completion with an additional year of support.**
2. Recipients of a F32 award may receive their training at a domestic or foreign institution or in industry or in a Federal government research facility.
3. Unlike all other NCI postdoctoral support grant mechanisms, which are reviewed by the Division of Extramural Activities in the NCI, F32s are peer-reviewed by standing review groups managed by the NIH **Center for Scientific Review**. This means that the NCI has very little influence over the management of the peer review process.
4. Unlike all other PHS support mechanisms, the F32 award is made directly to the applicant and not to a sponsoring institution when the fellow is working in a Federal facility or a foreign institution. Consequently, the award is under the control of the applicant and not the sponsoring institution or sponsor / mentor.

Preparing an Application

1. NIH estimates that 20 hours are required to prepare an F32 application. It is extremely important that you **follow the directions in the Form PHS 416-1** carefully. Incomplete applications or applications prepared in the wrong format (e.g., type size) may be returned. Properly prepared applications not only facilitate administrative processing by NIH but, more importantly, are received positively by peer reviewers who have the ultimate responsibility to judge the merit of your application, which will be the primary factor determining its competitiveness for funding.

III. ALLOWABLE COSTS:

Below is a brief overview of allowable costs. **More complete information is provided on the NIH websites listed above.**

1. Stipends:
The stipend level for the first year of NRSA support is determined by the number of full years of relevant postdoctoral experience at the time the award is issued. Relevant experience may include research (including research in industry), teaching, internship, residency, clinical duties, or other time spent in full-time studies in a health-related field beyond that of a qualifying doctoral degree.
These stipends escalate depending upon whether the recipient has 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 or 7 or more years of postdoctoral experience. Stipends are approved by Congress and can change each Fiscal Year. Consult NCI staff (see X. INQUIRIES) or go to the NIH website, <http://http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/index.html> and enter the words "nrса stipends increase" into the search engine.
2. Other Costs:
NCI will provide an institutional allowance per 12-month period to help defray such awardee expenses as research supplies, equipment, health insurance, and travel to scientific meetings.
For appropriate advice and specific instruction regarding budgetary and administrative policies that you must follow in managing this award, refer to section X. INQUIRIES.

IV. AWARD CRITERIA:

The National Cancer Institute makes its awards based on the availability of funds during each fiscal year, the scientific merit of the proposal as judged by peer review, and the program priorities of the NCI. In the past, the NCI has been able to fund approximately 40% of the applications approved by peer review.

V. AWARD PROCESS:

If your application is assigned a priority score by the initial peer review group that falls within the NCI payline for F32 applications, you will be contacted by NCI Program Staff. At the time of contact, you will be asked if you are still interested in accepting the fellowship award and will be informed of the process for activation. A representative of the NCI Grants Administration Office will subsequently contact you to make the official offer of an award and to negotiate the date for activation.

VI. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. Is a payback agreement required for all NRSA postdoctoral trainees?

Yes, but **only once** for all NRSA supported candidates at the outset of their initial 12-months of postdoctoral support. If the trainee received prior NRSA postdoctoral support that totals 12 months, on either an institutional training grant or fellowship, a new payback agreement would not be required. Payback begins on the 13th month of support and will end at the conclusion of the 24th month. If the trainee has a 3 year award the third year is without any obligations.

2. Can an NRSA F32 awardee receive concurrent supplemental salary/stipend support for the same research from an NIH research grant?

No. Public Health Service funds may NOT be used to supplement an NRSA stipend.

3. Can an NRSA F32 awardee receive compensation from an NIH grant for additional work?

Yes. An NRSA awardee may receive separate salary from an NIH grant when employed for services rendered that are not part of the training program, such as laboratory assistant. However, since NRSA awardees are expected to devote a 100% full-time effort (full-time being 40 hours per week) to the NRSA-supported program, employment must be on a limited part-time basis; and must not interfere, detract or prolong the awardee's training program. Part-time effort is considered by NCI to be up to 20 hours per week.

4. Does an awardee have to pay taxes on stipends?

The NCI does not provide tax advice to awardees. NRSA stipends are not considered salary nor are NRSA trainees considered employees of the NCI nor the institution in which they are training. There is some modest tax guidance provided in the NRSA guidelines. Your institution may have some experience in dealing with tax questions for its NRSA fellows, but the best approach in dealing with tax questions is to consult directly with the United States Internal Revenue Service.

5. How is the initial stipend level determined on an individual NRSA award?

The stipend level for the first year of NRSA support is determined by the number of full years of relevant postdoctoral experience at the time the award is made. Relevant experience may include research, teaching, internship, clinical duties, residency, or other time spent in full-time studies in a health-related field beyond that of the qualifying doctoral degree. The stipend levels are regulated by Congressional legislation and are regularly changed to meet the rise in the cost-of-living. The current stipend levels are noted under **ALLOWABLE COSTS** above, but it is important that you know how to determine the number of years of your relevant postdoctoral experience and double check the current stipend levels to ensure that you receive the stipend you are entitled to by law. Institutions often make errors in determining the correct stipend levels.

6. A potential awardee had prior NRSA support from an institutional grant from another agency. Is he/she eligible for an individual NRSA grant?

Postdoctoral fellows may receive up to 3 years of aggregate NRSA support, including any combination of support from institutional training grants and individual fellowship awards, unless a special waiver is requested by the awardee and approved by NCI. If the prior NRSA support was pre-doctoral, this would have no impact on the amount of postdoctoral support.

7. Should the sponsor assist the candidate in preparing the F32 grant application?

Yes. The sponsor should provide advice on grantsmanship as part of the training process, but the candidate is expected to write the application. This often helps eliminate the common flaws in an application resulting from lack of experience that often reduce the potential for funding. It is important that sponsor provide sufficient detail about the sources of funds that will be used to support the candidate's research and how the project supported by these funds relates to the candidate's research proposal.

8. Is the training record of the sponsor taken into consideration in the evaluation of a fellowship application by the CSR initial review group?

Yes. This is a critical component in determining the quality of the applicant's training environment. Applications with sponsors lacking a substantive track record in training postdoctoral individuals who continue in biomedical research after completion of their training will generally not be assigned a favorable priority score by the CSR initial review group. These applications are generally not competitive for funding.

9. Is an MD with no track record of research activity at a disadvantage applying for a NRSA grant?

This is very difficult to evaluate because each reviewer brings to the review process different sets of values and requirements in order to judge the future potential of an applicant. NIH recognizes the critical importance of training clinicians to become researchers and encourages them to apply. The peer review committee is usually constituted with a number of clinicians who recognize this kind of situation and give appropriate consideration to the unique position of physicians and other health professionals who are willing to undertake a minimum of 2 years of biomedical, behavioral or clinical research. A successful MD candidate usually provides clear evidence of a commitment to an independent research career that is readily recognized by the review committee. Selection of sponsor is also important in that evidence of a training record of training fellows and presentation of a training plan that is appropriate in scope and scientifically meritorious in the sponsor's area of expertise yet geared to the experience or lack of experience of the candidate is usually considered to generate a fundable score.

In general, the F32 is a good option for M.D.s, especially when they are focused entirely on basic research and have only a limited time (i.e., 2-3 years) to gain research experience. However, for M.D.s who have little initial research experience and wish to dedicate themselves to a basic or patient-oriented research career, there are better options available through the K08 or the K23 career development awards. These grant applications receive a more sensitized peer review because they are reviewed by the NCI, they offer a higher upper salary, and they can be for five years.

10. Is it possible to change sponsoring institutions while on an NRSA F32 Postdoctoral Fellowship ?

Yes. However, this requires prior approval by NCI staff. The awardee should first contact NCI Program staff prior to the change and discuss the reason for the change. NCI program staff will then request a letter from the awardee, cosigned by an appropriate business official at the sponsoring institution, describing the reason(s) for the change, and stating the proposed new sponsor and institution. The awardee must also describe in this letter the relationship between the peer-reviewed research program and the research training/program that is to be conducted at the new sponsoring institution, and explain how the proposed new sponsor will contribute the appropriate expertise to ensure achievement of the research/training objectives of the fellowship award. A letter of support from the proposed new sponsor, cosigned from a business official from the new sponsoring institution, should accompany the awardee's letter. If NCI Program staff recommend approval of the change, a transfer application will be mailed to the awardee by the NCI Grants Administration Branch for completion and return to the NCI.

Often in a change of institution there is also a change in the research project. Depending upon any extenuating circumstances and on whether the new project is within the scope of the originally peer-reviewed project or not, NCI Program staff need to approve of this change. This is looked at very carefully since the research project contributed significantly to the success of the original application in peer review. Program staff do not always approve of this change.

11. Can an awardee change sponsor during the course of the fellowship award?

Yes. However, the past sponsor was a critical element in the success of your application in peer review. Similar procedures will have to be followed as outlined above in Question 10. Anytime there is either a new research project or a new sponsor, the nature of the training experience changes significantly. NCI program staff look at each situation very carefully and do not always approve of the change.

12. Can an awardee change project during the course of a fellowship award?

This issue is discussed both in Question 10 and Question 11 above.

13. Can a grantee terminate his/her grant early?

Yes. When the decision is made to terminate early, contact your NCI Program Director for guidance. A termination notice should be sent to the NCI, as well as a new Notice of Research Fellowship Award to document the early termination. It may be necessary to contact the NCI to confirm the actual costs incurred during the training period and how much money still remains in the grant.

14. Can a NRSA fellow have more than one sponsor?

Yes. A second sponsor is advisable if the project requires special expertise or is being conducted in more than one location. Clinicians doing translational research projects may find it useful to have a clinical and basic science sponsor.

15. Is it possible to apply for a leave-of-absence from the grant?

Yes. Contact your NCI Program Director for guidance. These are usually unique situations that require prior approval of NCI. Extended leave from the grant is unpaid leave.

16. Can a person submit an individual NRSA grant application to train at a private for-profit biotech firm?

Yes. The application will be reviewed as any other application from a university or public institution. The applicant's sponsor should be an active investigator in the area of the proposed research who will directly supervise the candidate's research. The sponsor must document the availability of staff, research support, and facilities for high-quality research training. However, PHS policy states that the results and accomplishments funded from PHS support must be made available to the public in a timely manner. There should be no restrictions on the publication of results.

17. Can an applicant submit an individual NRSA application if he/she applied for a "green card" but has not received it yet?

Yes. Citizenship requirements for fellowships must be satisfied at the time of award. An individual must possess a currently valid Alien Registration Receipt Card I-551, or other legal verification of permanent residence status. Individuals on temporary or student visas are not eligible for a NRSA award.

18. Can a NRSA applicant apply for and then be supported from another award simultaneously?

No. Individuals supported by F32s are required to pursue their research training full-time, devoting at least 40 hours per week to the approved program.

19. Must each foreign and federal fellow submit an Activation Notice(Form PHS416-5) every year?

Yes. An Activation Notice is mailed by the NCI annually along with each award to each foreign and federal fellow. The fellow must complete the Activation Notice and return it immediately to the Cancer Training Branch who will process it, and forward it to the NIH Office of Financial Management. This document authorizes payments to the fellow from the US Treasury.

20. Are payback agreements required annually for foreign and federal fellows?

No. A payback agreement is required only for the initial 12 months of postdoctoral NRSA support regardless of where the NRSA training takes place.

21. What occurs when a foreign or Federal fellow terminates a grant early?

Once a direct pay fellow (direct from the US Treasury) notifies the NCI that he/she is terminating early, the Office of Financial Management will be contacted so they can withhold further payments. The NCI will then revise the Notice of Research Fellowship Award to reflect the early termination once it receives the Termination Notice from the awardee. NCI will forward a copy of the revised award and Termination Notice to the NIH Office of Financial Management to complete the process.

22. Are there special issues concerning the Termination Notice for foreign and Federal fellows?

Yes. Because these fellows are paid directly, no institutional business official signature is required. Direct pay fellows are required to report to the IRS all monies paid directly to them by Government check. Foreign fellows must also include any travel funds awarded.

23. Should grantees on fellowships in a foreign country have their stipend and travel checks sent to a foreign or domestic bank accounts?

Fellows are strongly encouraged to open a domestic bank account especially for this fellowship. This will avoid considerable delays encountered using foreign mail delivery. The fellow should investigate the electronic transfer of funds.

24. Is the procedure different when making an award to a foreign fellow compared to an award to a domestic institution?

Yes. Two awards are issued to foreign fellows. A personal award for stipend and any travel funds is issued directly to the fellow. An institutional award is issued to the foreign institution for only the Institutional Allowance.

25. Is health insurance required for federal fellows?

Yes. Federal fellows are required to obtain health insurance either from the Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences (FAES) or from a private company of their choice. If the fellow elects coverage from FAES, the funds are provided separately from the Institutional Allowance in the "Other Expenses" category. If the fellow elects coverage through a private company, the allowable premium is provided in addition to the stipend in the stipend category.

26. Can an individual apply for a NRSA grant before he/she completed all requirements for a doctorate?

Yes. Several awardees have timed the awarding of the NRSA award to their completion of the doctorate thereby beginning a postdoctoral program immediately. If there is a delay in completion of all academic requirements the award can be made to the candidate but the

implementation must wait until all degree requirements are completed. An awardee has a window up to 6 months after award to activate the grant.

27. What is the difference between supplementation and compensation?

Supplementation refers to additional money provided without the requirement for additional work. Compensation refers to money earned in return for additional work. An NRSA grant can be supplemented with non-PHS funds. An NRSA fellow can be compensated for additional work. However, the additional work must not prevent the fellow from completing the objectives of the NRSA award. The NCI recommends that fellows not spend more than 20 hours per week on compensated activities.

28. Can one have more than 3 years of NRSA supported postdoctoral training?

Only under exceptional circumstances is it possible to extend the total number of years of NRSA support beyond the congressionally mandated 3 years (postdoctoral) cap. A request for an extension must be made directly to the NCI Program Director.

29. If I have a F32 award and I would like to ask for post award changes? How do I go about this?

You must contact the NCI Grants Administration official to determine the appropriate procedures to use in making a request for post award changes in your grant. This also applies to any of your needs that require a prior approval from the NCI. In general, you will have to make a request that is signed by you and a business official of your institution. After receiving the request, the Grants Administration official will consult with the NCI scientific program staff as necessary to determine whether the request can be approved.

VII. INQUIRIES (F32):

We have tried to provide you with the most complete information possible about the **F32**, as well as answer the most frequently asked questions. If you need information and explanation concerning the **F32**, please make your inquiries as follows:

A. Programmatic or scientific issues:

If you need more information and/or advice about the objectives and scope of this award, eligibility requirements, structure and organization of grant applications and peer review trends, please contact us by "clicking on" the INQUIRIES link directly below. You will be contacted promptly by one of the scientific professionals of the Cancer Training Branch of the NCI.

B. Fiscal Issues:

If you need information about the appropriate procedures for dealing with issues that involve changes in the sponsoring institution, the scope of the project as awarded, budget and period of support of the award or that involve any other issues requiring approval by the NCI or post award actions, please contact us by "clicking on" the INQUIRIES link directly below. You will be contacted promptly by one of the Grants Administration officials of the NCI.